'Oz' on Hudson

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ABSTRACT

When the Paramount closed abruptly in 2012, she bided her time, creating a kids singing group, "The Wiz Kidz," which toured civic groups singing songs from the show. Liz Peterson, who plays the Wicked Witch, wants it known that the movie is not the whole story -- "there are books, lots of books," she says, including a graphic novel.

FULL TEXT

"Oz" is a lot of things to a lot of people: the land of the beloved 1939 Judy Garland musical; the setting for the contemporary "Wicked;" the realm for more than a dozen L. Frank Baum books.

"It's our American myth. London has 'Alice in Wonderland,' and this is our myth," said Scarlett Antonia producer of "The Wizard of Oz" at Peekskill's Paramount Hudson Valley Jan. 16-18. "People love this show."

Antonia has been itching to stage the musical at the Paramount since 2011. When the Paramount closed abruptly in 2012, she bided her time, creating a kids singing group, "The Wiz Kidz," which toured civic groups singing songs from the show.

Antonia did some reading and learned a thing or two, including the fact that Baum lived in Peekskill for a time, when he was 12 -- from 1868 to 1870 -- and attended the Peekskill Military Academy.

"I didn't know that when I started," she said. "He had a rough time here, he wasn't well and only stayed two years, but this is where he got his only formal education."

Some believe that Baum saw the yellow Dutch bricks that lined the streets of Peekskill when he was here, tucked them away in his memory and brought them back as a key plot device -- the Yellow Brick Road -- when he sat down to write "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz," published in 1900. Others say Dutch bricks were everywhere, and there's no way to confirm that Peekskill's bricks led to Oz.

At least two members of the 37-member cast are self-proclaimed Ozophiles.

Poughkeepsie native Victoria Calamito, who now lives in Brewster, is a member of the International Wizard of Oz Club and even has a YouTube channel devoted to all things Oz, with clips of her vast collection and several Oz events. She says most Oz fans accept the Peekskill connection to the golden bricks.

Liz Peterson, who plays the Wicked Witch, wants it known that the movie is not the whole story -- "there are books, lots of books," she says, including a graphic novel. Peterson, of Peekskill, says defiantly she quit the International Oz Club in a spat with one of its officers. (Then again, she might have just been being argumentative to get in character.)

Whether the Yellow Brick Road origin story is true or not, or can be confirmed or not, Antonia likes the thought of the connection. And there's no doubt Baum once called Peekskill home.

The producer also says she likes the fact that this weekend, with the Paramount back, Baum's myth finally becomes reality in Peeskill, as she runs four performances of the Royal Shakespeare Company adaptation under the direction of Putnam Valley's Melody Wolford.

At the suggestion of her Broadway stagehand husband, Wolford leaves the stage largely bare, with just a couple of set pieces rolled in. Animations (by Stutterdot Designs) projected on a huge screen carry the audience through the story, from Kansas twister to flying witch to flying monkeys to Emerald City.

"The set is the screen," said Wolford, who declares that this adaptation is faithful to the book, right down to the final moment which, she said, has never been seen on a stage before.

"There's something I do at the end of the show that I think L. Frank Baum would love, and I do something with the Winkies (the Wicked Witch's soldiers) that I think people in Peekskill will appreciate."

Any changes are along the margins, Wolford said.

"It's still the story, it's still the songs, it's still the joy of knowing that if you can dream it, you can find your Yellow Brick Road."

People will come in recognizing the story, and the score by Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg, including "(Somewhere) Over the Rainbow," and the Scarecrow, Tin Man and Cowardly Lion.

And they'll come with expectations for the kid from Kansas, Dorothy, played by 15-year-old Gabbie Sansone, of Mohegan Lake.

"Dorothy isn't a big singing part, actually," Sansone said. "It's a huge acting part. I bring a lot of myself to it, which I think will open some eyes. I am a lot like Judy Garland, but I'm not her, so I need to make it believable."

Dawn Benson's Yorkie, Tootie, plays Toto, Dorothy's dog.

"We just came to the audition and they loved Tootie," said Benson, of Peekskill. "So here we are."

Here. Peekskill. Land of "Oz."

For this weekend, at least.

If you go

What: "The Wizard of Oz," presented by Antonia Arts.

Where: Paramount Hudson Valley Theater, 1008 Brown St., Peekskill.

Tickets: $25; $15 for students and seniors.

When: 7 p.m., Jan. 16; 2 and 7 p.m., Jan. 17; 3 p.m., Jan. 18. Contact Antonia Arts, Inc. or the Paramount Hudson Valley Theater box office for ticket sales. For special holiday packages, group sales of 10 or more, special matinee, opening night reception, dinner and theatre, or to make this a special event, please contact Scarlett Antonia (914) 930-7588 or antoniaarts2@gmail.com.

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